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"Missions Is Folks"

By FRANK S. MEAD

Take your time. Laugh a little. With this formula Edward Odell built in Puerto Rico one of the most fruitful mission ventures of our times.

IF and when some brash young author starts to write a book on "How to Win Friends and Be a Good Missionary," he'll be smart if he talks with Edward A. Odell. For Odell, who retires in December from his post as secretary for the West Indies for the Presbyterian Board of National Missions, has an almost fool-proof formula for success in missions. It was fifty years in the making.

Your bright young author would have his troubles with Odell; the man won't talk. He is highly suspicious of those who toot their own horns. "Anything I have ever done by myself," he says, "has never amounted to a hoot." He's been one of a big team in the West Indies since 1903, and he says the team did it. That's probably true. But Odell is the symbol of missionary forces and techniques that have made the West Indies Exhibit A in modern missions. And he is, whether he admits it or not, one of the best-informed men in the country on that particular field.

His formula for missionaries runs something like this: "Take your time. Missions is a long-term investment in individuals. Go live with your people as though you were one of them; pick out the most promising ones and go to work on them, and get them ready to take over when you quit. But love 'em all, brother, and they'll love you. And please, laugh a little, will you? A good sense of humor is more important than a seminary education."

Takes his time

For nearly half a century, as a Caribbean missionary or as Board secretary, Odell has been taking his time. If he were to meet the Archangel Gabriel on Fifth Avenue he'd nod, smile, and keep going. He's like that. Nearly seventy, he ambles along like a man of forty-five; he averages 165-170 on the bowling alleys, plays a good (leisurely) game of golf, and he once took a tennis championship in Puerto Rico. That ambling gait, that disarming readiness to sit down and chat, is deceiving. He gets things done. He never gives you the impression of trying to sell a bill of goods, but the bill gets sold. Only yesterday, in a railroad station we shouted to him, "We'd better step on it, or we'll miss the train." He replied, "O.K. Then we'll catch the next one." We caught the train. He'll never get ulcers.

He takes his time because he realizes that Rome wasn't built in a day and that the world will probably not be saved in this generation. It's a long job; it depends on contacts, on training people against tomorrow. Missions is folks. When he was still a young student at Princeton, he asked Dr. John Dixon to send him to some challenging spot in Puerto Rico, "some place too rugged for a married man. I'm young. And healthy. And single." Dixon sent him to Lares, a mountain town twenty-five miles from a railroad, and when he first realized the inaccessibility of the town, he laughed: "I said to myself, 'The old man can't take a joke.'" But he loved it. He went to live with a Puerto Rican family, not one of whom could speak a word of English; he went there deliberately to learn to speak Spanish. He learned. He still thinks "they were fine people in that family."

That's a typical Odell remark. Everybody is fine people. There was one citizen in that town who didn't seem so fine to the other citizens; it was rumored that he had once killed a man. But Odell played chess with him and taught him to make ice and ice cream—which made him very popular. Missions is—folks.

They liked him

One sunny afternoon he saw an army officer riding a beautiful horse down the village street; he followed the captain home, bought the horse, and went riding all over the hills, one pocket full of Spanish verbs and the other full of Gospel tracts. He sat down and chatted in back-country huts; they liked him. He just lived with them. Years later, he sent a man named Gomez into a hill town in Cuba with the order: "Just go up there and live the Christian life. Don't start a church. Don't preach. Just show them how a Christian lives." It paid off: the town was so spellbound by the Christian living of Gomez that they asked him to start a church. One tough non-churchman, watching Gomez walk down the street, remarked reverently, "There goes Jesus Christ." Odell has picked men like that and trained men like that. Gomez did the job, but it was Odell's idea.

One of those official "committees" went down there to look things over recently, and they were nonplussed at first to see some young college girl come rushing up to Odell and plant a healthy kiss on his cheek. And right behind her would be the old grandfather, his arms open to receive Odell as his own son. We saw an ex-Chief Justice of the Puerto Rican Supreme Court do that to him, just last week.

"Exchange of arms"

He cultivated friendship; he picked key men. A hard-boiled and very handsome Army officer who had just cleaned up Panama came to Puerto Rico to organize the police force. Odell wasn't fooled by the tough exterior; he took George Shanton into the church. When Odell left the island, the "cop" sent a parting gift to the ship: a huge, gleaming, Colt revolver. Odell sent back his gift: a New Testament, with the words, "This is an exchange of arms." The Colt has never been fired, but when Shanton died they found the Testament at his bedside.

Out of this affection for people has come an amazing thing: there is not today a single Anglo-Saxon Presbyterian minister in Puerto Rico. They are all Puerto Ricans, picked up from hut and palace, inspired and trained to take over. You could seal Puerto Rico up in a great container, clamp the lid down tight for a hundred years, and when you took the lid off, Christ and Christian living would still be there. This Protestant Church is an indigenous church, and a very large part of the credit for that must go to Edward A. Odell.

That's what he means by a "team" job; there is nothing of the dictator in him. When someone writes him about an administrative problem he is likely to write back: "You settle it; that's your problem." His committee meetings go sometimes to 2 A.M.; but at 2 A.M., the decision is theirs, not his.

Some think he isn't Presbyterian enough, at times. When they got into an impasse recently over the appointment of a new president for the Union Seminary in Puerto Rico, a bad interdenominational scrap seemed inevitable; Odell stopped it by obtaining Presbyterian funds to pay a Baptist "prexy" in a Union Seminary! "Why not?" he asks. "He was the man for the job, wasn't he?" Ability to do a job is more important, to his way of thinking, than denominational connections. The Kingdom is larger than any one church.

He has encouraged Presbyterian cooperation in Union Seminary, at the Polytechnic Institute, in the publication of an interdenominational paper, and in two union churches. (Four of the five churches he has pastored in the West Indies, incidentally, are now self-supporting churches.) He has fought hard to maintain the (gentlemen's) comity agreement in the territory, under which the denominations divided the territory and each stayed in its allotted portion, letting the other denominations work elsewhere. Like Penn's treaty with the Indians, it is an agreement never put in writing and never broken.

"Spare time" work

When the English-speaking people of Havana came to the place where they wanted a church of their own, they asked Odell to do the preaching; he did it in "spare time" snatched from his work as superintendent of Spanish-speaking work. The businessmen of Cuba wanted an "English" hospital; they came to him and said, "As businessmen, we're disgracefully suspicious of each other. But we trust you. Will you lead the campaign?" He led: the hospital stands today as an Odell accomplishment. When he announced that he was leaving Havana, later, they came to him again: "Why are you leaving us? Is it for financial reasons? If it is, write your own check!" But it wasn't financial; he was leaving in the interests of an indigenous church.

A Canadian "nobleman" was in Havana during the hospital campaign; they went to him for a contribution. He put his nose in the air and said, "I am not interested. In Canada, the government builds the hospitals." Odell asked him, "Sir, if you have an attack of acute appendicitis tonight, where will you go?" "I don't know," snapped his lordship. "Where will I go?" Odell couldn't resist it. He said, "That, sir, all depends on how you're living!" His lordship wrote a check.

Sparkling good humor

That sparkling good humor is his greatest asset. But it is never facetious, never trifling. Men die of acute appendicitis, and his lordship knew it. Once when the National Board was trying to pick a man for a hot spot in Cuba, Odell suggested a man with the recommendation that "He knows how to keep his mouth shut in two languages." The Board laughed—and got the point; a missionary down there can blunder in Spanish easier than in English.

The Latins like his good humor; they are naturally a bubbling people, loving a laugh. They go for Odell, perhaps because he is such a bewildering denial of the ancient and dishonorable conception of a missionary as a sour-puss in a stove-pipe hat and a swallow-tail coat. They like a happy religion, and this is it. But the humor is reverent, a corollary to the main effort, which is the teaching and preaching of the Gospel of Christ.

Years ago he got a box of clothes for a leper colony in the hills; he was so gleeful over those clothes that he started to tear the lid off the box before he started the usual chapel service. An old man said to him, "Sir, we are most grateful for the clothes. But—couldn't we pray first?" Odell never forgot it; his program from there on was one of prayer first, clothes second.

He is a little impatient with those well-meaning enthusiasts who think salvation may come to these Indies by way of new clothes, better pigpens, and staggered crops. That may be important, but . . . "Until you get better Christian character in the individual, you never get a better community." Right now he is enthusiastic about El Guacio—a brilliant community project in the hills near San Sebastian (*see P.L., June 19, 1948*), where a group of young people are working for ten dollars a month and board, leaving a whole countryside with an unbelievable demonstration of Christian living and service. He backs El Guacio to the limit, as he has backed many another social project—but for every new pigpen in that new project he has backed a dozen new churches.

Slow, patient, loving work

Fifty years ago, there was something shameful about being a Protestant in Puerto Rico; now it is respectable and a part of the thinking of the people. That isn't a triumph for Odell alone, and he's the first to say so, nor is it cause for crowing in Protestantism. It is simply the outgrowth of the missionary method in which he has pinned his faith. It is slow, patient, loving work with individuals. You'll never understand it by studying statistical reports of Presbyterian progress; you'll get it by studying the human product—the children snatched from poverty and ignorance, the nurses, doctors, teachers, the Christian housewives and statesmen, and the little evangelists in the hills. Slowly, they have found in the Bible and in the living of the missionary the truth that sets men free, and they say "I'm free!" now as they never said it in the days just after the Spanish War. It was political freedom then. Now they know of the wider liberty won for them by Christ.

It took a long time, but what is time to God? He has all eternity to work in. It took time, and love, and

laughter, and faith in people. But it has been one of the most fruitful missionary efforts of our times.

The "beloved boss" retires this year. But the forces and the tides of which he has been so great a part will not retire. Do the tides of the sea stop rolling when one ship ties up?

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MORE ABOUT DR. ODELL AND WORK IN THE WEST INDIES

"He gets things done"

"That ambling gait," Frank Mead writes, "that disarming readiness to sit down and chat, is deceiving. He gets things done. He never gives you the impression of trying to sell a bill of goods, but the bill gets sold."

Two things Dr. Odell has worked for in the West Indies. One is the promotion of denominational strength. The other is the promotion of interdenominational strength.

Certain areas were assigned to the Presbyterian Church for development. In Puerto Rico it was the western part of the island, together with any work in San Juan, the capital, and in other cities of 25,000 and up. In Cuba, it was the provinces of Havana, Matanzas, Pinar del Rio, and Santa Clara. As secretary for the West Indies since 1924, Dr. Odell's responsibility has been to cultivate the life and work of the church in those areas. Since New York is almost eight hundred miles away, obviously much of that cultivation would have to be done through other men.

"The greatest factor in the development of ministers," Dr. Odell comments, looking back on the record of the years, "has been the union Evangelical Seminary." The president for twenty-five years of this interdenominational project in Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico, was the Rev. James McAllister, D.D., now retired. The Seminary could train students for the ministry, but supervision was needed. Dr. Odell picked supervisors whose work is outstanding. Dr. Angel Archilla is not only the most brilliant public speaker in Puerto Rico today, but a man of the breadth and vision to see the church as it could be, and of practical ability to handle the problems of small and unprivileged groups. In Cuba the Rev. Julio Fuentes is consultant and resource man for similar groups in the Republic.

"What I have tried to do all along," Dr. Odell says, "has been to facilitate the expression of ability wherever it appears." Having watched and recognized the man with ability, Dr. Odell keeps his hands off but his mind and heart close to the man and his work. "You haven't told me what to do," one correspondent wrote recently about his field. "I don't intend to tell you," was the reply, "because I don't know. And even if I did, it is your field and your job. Work out the plans to suit the situation." At the same time he takes a particular delight in finding ways of helping a man who will profit by some special opportunity but cannot manage it himself—to bring him North to study, to send him to an important conference, to provide him with needed equipment.

He works with others

But while building up Presbyterian strength through these men, Dr. Odell has been active in interdenominational Christian work as well. He was a delegate at the history-making 1916 Panama Congress of evangelical churches of all Latin America. He is a trustee of the Polytechnic Institute and of the Evangelical Seminary. He is a member of the Committee on Cooperation in Latin America, that coordinates the work of evangelical churches throughout that vast area. Many of the forward steps in Christian unity taken in the Caribbean are in advance of those taken in continental United States. His influence has been important in the Board for Christian Work in Santo Domingo, through which Presbyterians, Methodists, and United Brethren work as one mission in the Dominican Republic. When in 1938 Dr. Odell was sent to the world-wide Christian conference in Madras, India, that great gathering noted the work in the Dominican Republic as a successful example of the kind of Christian unity that might well be developed in other areas. Following that meeting, Dr. Odell was asked by the Board of Foreign Missions to share in a survey of missions in India, and later to undertake a similar task in Venezuela and Colombia. In 1946 he founded the interdenominational seminary at Matanzas, Cuba, of which Dr. Alfonso Rodriguez is president.

Fifty years

A summary of the Presbyterian churches in the West Indies shows forty-four in Puerto Rico and twenty-nine in Cuba. Besides these, however, are many unorganized preaching centers, one or more Sunday schools connected with each church, the rural community project at El Guacio, Puerto Rico, and, in addition, many projects that have been privately developed by evangelical people under the stimulus of a Christian vigor that leads naturally to the service of others. Schools, Sunday schools, community welfare work, larger parish development, Bible classes, aid to young people seeking an education, are some of the forms of service.

In the spring of 1949 the churches of Puerto Rico celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of evangelical church work in the islands. It was estimated that, besides those attending local and denominational observances, more than twenty-five thousand people crowded into the stadium in San Juan for the main celebration. Dr. Odell had his part in both the work and the honors attending the celebration. But it is safe to say that while his unquenchable spirit of youth was stirred by the twenty-five thousand, his heart of a man long linked to this work was set more upon the individuals he knew and remembered. For the man who for twenty-five years has guided the development of Presbyterian work in the West Indies has never forgotten that from the time that God talked to Moses as a man speaks to his friend, and Jesus talked individually to Nicodemus and to the woman of Samaria and to many others, so it is still individuals that carry forward the work of building the Kingdom of God on earth.

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